



Missing Dog Tag Returned After 67 Years

It's not often one has the opportunity to return something lost nearly 12,000 miles away – especially if that loss occurred approximately 67 years ago in some of the heaviest fighting of World War II. When the item in question is something as personal as a missing World War II dog tag, one that had once belonged to an American soldier who fought his way through the bloody Solomon Islands Campaign in 1943, the effort to return it takes on a quest-like feel.

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When a longtime friend returned in August from a stay in the South Pacific with a story about this long-lost World War II dog tag, I was intrigued. My friend, Jeff Allen, who grew up alongside me in Richmond, Va., had spent much of the last year living with native Solomon Islanders in the village of Munda.

Munda sits on the west side of New Georgia Island, which lies northwest of Guadalcanal and just south of Choiseul Island and Bougainville. It was there, in the summer of 1943, that American Soldiers, Sailors and

Marines under the command of Adm. William “Bull” Halsey defeated well-entrenched Japanese Imperial forces in an engagement known as the Battle of Munda Point, securing a strategically-important airfield that would be used against the Japanese fleet concentration at Rabaul in New Britain Island. This little-known but critical battle played a key role in Operation Cartwheel, a joint Army-Navy offensive that resulted in the capture of the Solomon Islands from the Japanese. This phase of America’s island-hopping campaign helped pave the way for Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s eventual liberation of the Philippines.

When he wasn't dealing with bouts of malaria, coexisting with sharks, crocodiles and venomous Portuguese man-of-war jellyfish and exploring the dense tropical jungles of New Georgia, Jeff spent his time working to improve the lives of the villagers. During that period, he befriended one of the locals, a man who currently works at Munda Airport, the same airfield U.S. troops fought successfully to secure. When this man learned Jeff was returning to Virginia for several months, he entrusted Jeff with the American dog tag, which he had found nearby and kept for many years. He asked Jeff to return it to its original owner or to his family.

It seemed a daunting task. Although World War II era dog tags resemble their modern counterparts, they do not contain the same information today's versions do. Back then, for example, they did not list a person's blood type or even, necessarily, a first name. The dog tag Jeff received contained the following information: a last name and first initials – C.L. Rutkowski; a 1940s-era military serial number; the name of the soldier's next-of-kin – Mr. W. Rutkowski; the Rutkowskis' Buffalo, N.Y., address, circa 1943; and the letter "C," presumably for Catholic.

Having recently had some luck tracking down lost appellate defense clients, I offered to help Jeff in his search for the mysterious C.L. Rutkowski. Fortunately, the wide expanse of information available on the Internet today makes such searches both realistic to comprehend and relatively pain-free. Most of the research can be done for free and from one location. It's hard to imagine taking on this task in pre-Internet days.

Even so, the search required a bit of luck and a team effort. I began by entering the name "Rutkowski" on Google. But that name, surprisingly, is more common than one might think. That search got me nowhere.

At the suggestion of LT Mike Torrisi, a fellow judge advocate and one of my Appellate Defense Division (Code 45) colleagues, we did a Google Maps search of 365 Eagle Street, the Buffalo, N.Y., the address on the dog tag. This turned up a quiet, suburban neighborhood with houses that looked much like you would have expected them to look in the 1940s. We next looked up Catholic churches in the area, hoping to find someone in a local congregation who may have remembered the Rutkowskis of that era. Unfortunately, we couldn't find anyone who did remember them, and we had to concede that we were at a dead end.

It was U.S. Marine, Capt. Mike Berry, another of my colleagues in Appellate Defense, who made the breakthrough. He suggested we look at the National Archives website – in particular, their Access to Archival Databases, or AAD section – to see if we could find our soldier. At this point, luck worked in our favor. I had assumed, based on the heavy participation of Marines in the Solomon Islands campaign, that Rutkowski must be a Marine. But we did not see a Marine data-

base, and his name popped up once we typed his serial number into the Archives' World War II Army enlistment database, meaning he had served in the Army.

That gave us his first name (Casimir), his birth-year (1924), the year he enlisted in the Army (1943) and his rank at the time (Private). Now, that we had something to go on –and even better, a unique first name – it became a matter of entering his full-name into Google and seeing what turned up. What we learned was that Private Rutkowski, who went by the nickname "Casey," survived the war, moved back to the United States and raised a family before passing away less than two years ago at the age of 85. Sadly, we just missed returning the dog tag to him in person.

But there was still the tricky matter of tracking down his next-of-kin. Here, I received some help from my aunt, Maxine Walters, who found some names listed in Mr. Rutkowski's obituary and obtained a phone number and address for one of them – Ms. Henrietta Rutkowski – in Henderson, Nev. As it turned out, Henrietta was the widow of Private Rutkowski.

Later, Maxine also found a MySpace page for the Rutkowskis' son, Shawn, a Las Vegas promoter. The MySpace page really drove home the point of this quest because the first picture Shawn had posted on his website was the military-issued gravestone for his father, complete with mention of his World War II service.

Late one evening, while still in the office, I dialed the number for Mrs. Rutkowski. A pleasant, elderly-sounding woman answered. After asking her a series of questions – if her husband was named Casimir, if he had served in World War II, and if he had spent any time in the Solomon Islands – and receiving affirmative answers to each, I told her, "I may have something that belongs to you."

It is hard to describe the emotion of the moment as I related to her what I was, at that very moment, holding in my hand, and where it had been found. Suffice to say, to return an object like that to the widow of a World War II veteran, so long after it has been lost, is as gratifying an experience as any I have had. For Mrs. Rutkowski, who lost her husband so recently, this tangible reminder of him brought tears of joy.

Her husband, she said, had, in fact, earned three bronze stars fighting in the Pacific. But, like many veterans of that fierce jungle campaign, he rarely talked about his wartime experiences and left few mementos of it. She and Shawn, their only child, had learned most of what they knew about his World War II combat exploits from looking through his papers after he passed away.

To rediscover this dog tag now, so soon after his death, so many miles and years from where the 19-year-old Private Rutkowski had lost it, was truly, indescribably special for them. And I will always remember the quest that led to its return. 🍷